

Gulfarium: A Look Behind the Seas

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Abstract

A leaping dolphin, a splashing seal, a playful otter, and a sea lion balancing a ball on its nose are some of most exciting exhibitions to see when you visit a zoo or aquarium. In recent years, there has been increasing debate as to whether the animals, specifically marine mammals, in human care are treated ethically, and whether or not they belong only in the wild. Films such as *Blackfish* and protests from extreme animal rights activists have captured the attention of audiences all across the globe. Do they present an accurate picture of the ethics behind animal captivity? Could zoos and aquariums be doing more harm than good? I decided to make my own documentary of what really goes on at an aquarium that cares for marine animals. Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park allowed my camera and I to capture exciting footage, interview staff members, and go "behind the seas."

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Honors Thesis Artist Statement

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Recently more and more people are beginning to comment about their feelings towards animals being held captive in facilities such as zoos and aquariums. From debates on CNN, to Facebook arguments, to even snipe comments made on YouTube videos, everyone seems to voice an opinion. As a frequent observer of these arguments, I have noticed many are heavily fueled by emotions; especially those directed against animal captivity. It's a touchy subject and one that has been weighing on my mind particularly because I want to go into the animal care field. I am tired of blatant misunderstanding and ridicule by friends and family centered on my career choice; so this summer, I decided to do something about it.

The inspiration for my Honors thesis project *Gulfarium: A Look Behind the Seas* stems from my emotional reaction and the reactions of countless others to watching the film *Blackfish*. It's the story of a killer whale named Tillikum, the ill-fated day that he killed his trainer, and the argument against keeping killer whales and ultimately all marine mammals in captivity. Watching the movie, I was shocked and couldn't believe the seemingly horrible treatment of the SeaWorld whales, and the alleged cruelty that led to Tillikum taking the life of his trainer. This film hit me especially hard. All my life, I have dreamed of becoming a dolphin trainer and working for a facility like SeaWorld,

and now this film comes along and exposes an apparent nightmare for trainers and animals alike.

I decided to go back and watch the film more closely. I began to realize how one-sided every argument seemed to be. The film was well edited, but very misleading. Coming from a background of Biology, I have honed the skills of critical thinking, logical thinking, and an analytical eye. I have also spent seven years of my life volunteering with marine mammals and working closely with trainers at the Indianapolis Zoo. With these assets in mind, I decided it was time I took my emotional turmoil into my own hands and did some research to see whether the claims in the film were true. After all, you can't believe everything you see on TV right?

First stop on my research mission was to see how the "evil" SeaWorld was defending its dastardly deeds. I found many of SeaWorld's statements about their killer whale care, not only backed by third-party, peer-reviewed research, but logically making sense with my personal experiences working with a similar facility. The third-party research about killer whales comes from the *Journal of Mammology*. The research compared the current, average lifespans of the SeaWorld pod of orcas with the current, average lifespans of two populations of wild whales. The results showed that the averages were the exact same. SeaWorld killer whales live just as long as wild whales. *Blackfish* inaccurately states otherwise. Also, as far as my personal experiences go, I happen to know about surprise USDA inspections that take place every year for every marine mammal facility in the United States. The USDA has a strict set of regulations that every facility under their watch has to follow. These concern everything from the storage and preparation of the restaurant quality food, to the interactions between

trainers and animals, to the upkeep of the animals' environments, and many other areas of animal care. I knew that some of the claims made in *Blackfish*, if true, would be ousted by the USDA. If the USDA did find any violations, those would be public information and SeaWorld critics and the media would be all over it by now. Recently, all three parks of SeaWorld have been inspected and reported to be meeting and/or exceeding regulations by the USDA. It's interesting how this never seems to be reported by the media. Besides meeting the USDA standards, SeaWorld has actually gone on to receive higher accreditations from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums, and the International Marine Animal Trainer's Association. These added a few more checkmarks for SeaWorld on my list.

I could go on and on with the number of blatant lies and mistruths told by *Blackfish* and anti-captivity activists, as my search for the truth wore on. I was no longer sad about the whales living at SeaWorld. Instead, I was infuriated at what was becoming clearer to me as an activist agenda. This agenda, whatever its goals, has none of the whales' best interests at heart. These people and the filmmakers of *Blackfish* didn't even bother to do their research or see for themselves how the whales are actually cared for. They just decided to make a shocking movie that would win awards and get attention for all the wrong reasons.

Knowing all of this, I had to take action and defend not only places like SeaWorld, but all zoos and aquariums. These places are a necessity to animals and people for several reasons. One of the most important reasons they are necessary is for conservation. Helping to conserve species is something no other business or

industry can do nearly as well. Part of conservation is rescuing, rehabilitating, and possibly providing homes for many animals. Injured, sick, stranded, and orphaned animals need places to go to receive care and people who know how to care for them. Zoos, aquariums, and stranding facilities/rescues are the only facilities that completely fill this need. A little known fact about zoos and aquariums is that they often house rescued animals that were deemed "unreleaseable" by the US government. The Indianapolis Zoo, for example, is home to two orphaned sea lions, an orphaned dolphin, an orphaned harbor seal, a permanently injured sea lion, and many others. SeaWorld Orlando is home to three young, abandoned short-finned pilot whales and countless other "unreleasables." Without SeaWorld providing a home for the pilot whales and many other marine animals, they would have been euthanized on the beach where they had stranded. By the way, SeaWorld has one of the largest rescue and rehabilitation operations in the world with over 27,000 animals rescued since the company's conception fifty years ago. You don't hear this fact from activists ever.

Another necessity that zoos and aquariums meet is public education. Informing the public is as much a part of the job as animal care for a trainer. Public education comes in many forms at zoos and aquariums; whether it comes from an entertaining show, an up-close animal interaction, or naturalists/educators who stand by exhibits and answer questions. The information that people receive when they visit a zoo or aquarium has a much greater impact than information from the TV or a book. Guests are not only mentally engaged, but emotionally engaged as well. Seeing these exotic and magnificent animals up-close fosters a connection with these animals, and that connection inspires action. This is a proven way to get people to care about these

animals and what happens to their wild counter-parts and habitats. The number one cause of species extinction is humans: plain and simple. If we don't educate people and get them to care about these animals or the Earth we all share, then there will be no more of these animals left. This is not just an ideological rant, it's happening before our very eyes. My whole summer, during my internship at the Gulfarium, I had to give public chats about groups of animals housed at the Gulfarium. One chat was about the African penguin, an endangered species that scientists are predicting in a few years will be extinct due to human impact! An entire species gone because of our ignorance! Extinction is a terrible, inexcusable tragedy that zoos and aquariums are working very hard to prevent.

Zoos and Aquariums not only contribute to conservation by providing animal ambassadors and public education, but they also contribute to scientific advancement and research. The majority of zoos and aquariums participate in conducting research with their animals. The topics of this research are broad; from figuring out the gestation period and optimal environmental conditions for breeding walrus, to artificial insemination of a white rhino. There is so much information that we have learned from captive animals that wouldn't have been possible trying to study wild animals. This information is invaluable. The best part about this research is that it helps those wild animals. For example, African penguins are often seen in zoos and aquariums because this species is endangered and on the verge of extinction. The reason why they are there is for facilities to figure out why they have so little success laying viable eggs in the wild. We can study these animals in captivity; try different things to help them increase breeding success, and find a solution to stop the extinction of these birds.

As you can see, zoos and aquariums fulfill many vital roles in a postmodern, scientific, humanistic society. The purpose of my documentary is to showcase these vital roles and their importance to our society. This film is a foil to *Blackfish*, and is meant to give its audience a different view on animal captivity and why it is necessary. My intended audience is as broad as possible. This film will be uploaded to YouTube as well as Facebook, and other sources of social media, in order to reach a maximum number of audience members. My goal is to reach as many people as possible, and show them the relevance of zoos and aquariums today. I am hopeful that after viewing my documentary, audience members will consider visiting and supporting local zoos and aquariums.

While, talking about the roles of zoos and aquariums, the film focuses behind the scenes at Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park. The Gulfarium is exemplified as a typical marine park which houses many aquatic wonders including its biggest draw; marine mammals. The film looks at different aspects of animal care, as well as the impacts a place like the Gulfarium has on its guests. Each section of the film is dedicated to revealing the true functions of a marine mammal facility. The main body of *Gulfarium: A Look Behind the Seas* consists of three interviews conducted this summer, while I worked as an intern for the Gulfarium. The interviewees were Zach Carter, Cat Rust, and Allen McDowell.

Zach Carter, a current trainer, was interviewed first. The purpose of his interview was to highlight shows and animal encounters and their relevance. I wanted to start the film off with what people are most curious about seeing when they visit a marine park; the shows and animal encounters. I felt it was important to clarify the reasons that

shows and encounters are vital aspects of a zoo or aquarium. Shows and encounters are great ways of building that human-animal connection. Jack Hanna says you must "touch the heart to teach the mind," and I heartily agree. These memorable experiences often foster a sense of respect and stewardship towards the animals and their natural habitats, which is the goal of a zoo or aquarium. Critics of facilities who host shows and animal encounters often say that the animals are forced to perform and they "hate" the daily interactions with their trainers and the guests. I have found this couldn't be further from the truth, and I've seen it with my own eyes. Zoos and aquariums in the United States train their animals using a technique called positive reinforcement. Put simply, trainers reward desired behavior (with food, a belly rub, toy, or anything the animal finds motivating) and they ignore undesired behavior. Trainers work very hard to keep things interesting for the animals. Every show and encounter is a little bit different. With shows, the segments and narrations may be the same, but the animals performing and the behaviors performed may be different. This is done on purpose to keep the shows interesting and variable for the animals. Encounters and all training sessions work the same way. The animals' performances are voluntary and, while we may never know what an animal is actually thinking, the animals are participating and they seem to find human interaction just as reinforcing as we find the interactions with them.

The second interview with Cat Rust, a park supervisor, focuses on all different aspects of animal care. She elaborates on the strict USDA standards and the even higher accreditations awarded to top marine mammal facilities I mentioned earlier. Many visitors of zoos and aquariums don't realize the amount of care provided to resident animals. A goal of this film is to highlight the exceptional care they receive and

the effects of that care on resident animals, as well as, potentially, their wild counterparts. The animals in U.S. zoos and aquariums receive not only excellent health care, but daily enrichment as well. Enrichment is anything that enhances the well-being of the animals. Common enrichment includes toys, scents, spices, non-ordinary food items, environmental changes, different social groupings, and anything not associated with a “typical” day for an animal. The creative possibilities with enrichment are endless and it’s part of a trainer’s job to learn good enrichment practices for the animals in their care.

The last topic that Cat discusses is successful reproductive management, within zoos and aquariums, and the recent birth of Kaya, a dolphin calf. Successful reproductive activity and births provide evidence that animals at facilities are thriving and living healthy lives. Reproductive success is important for any facility to strive for, not only for the well-being of their animals, but each birth helps us to learn more about those animals and saving their wild populations.

The final interview with Allen McDowell heavily emphasizes the impact of marine mammal facilities in helping to save wild populations of animals. The Gulfarium participates in the rescue and rehabilitation of wild sea turtles. The sea turtle C.A.R.E. program (conserve, act, rehabilitate, and educate) is a core element to the Gulfarium and it sums up the purpose of zoos and aquariums today. I wanted to showcase this important function of the Gulfarium because it serves as a strong final statement as to why zoos and aquariums are relevant today. Many facilities like the Gulfarium participate in some kind of rescue program and house rehabilitation animals. The final segment of *Gulfarium: A Look Behind the Seas* is the story of Floater. Floater is a

rescued loggerhead sea turtle who has such significant damage to her shell, because of a boat propeller strike, that she cannot be returned to the wild. Fortunately, the Gulfarium is now her forever home where she is cared for, given a second chance at life, and acts as an animal ambassador for the guests who visit the marine park. I was fortunate enough to be able to capture some amazing footage of resident sea turtles, such as Floater, as well as rescued sea turtles temporarily housed at the Gulfarium.

All footage for this project, except for the sea turtle release footage and sea turtle rescue still photos, was filmed by me, on my days off from interning, and in agreement with the managing staff of the Gulfarium. All filming equipment including; camera, tripod, and journalism microphone were provided by the Ball State University Telepex. It took about five different days of filming to gather all of the footage seen. All three of the interviews were filmed in one session per interviewee. I decided to make the film more documentary style, so the questions I asked for the interviews are edited out and the film has more of a storyline. Overall, it took thirty hours to edit and render the film. I used Ball State University computers with Adobe Premier Pro CC for editing. I have never made a film before, so I taught myself using YouTube videos on editing in Premier Pro. For the rendering process and to look over the final version of my film, I enlisted the help of Lan Franczek; assistant editor. The final edit was sent for approval to Chad Stouffer, the Gulfarium's director of animal management, and was pre-approved by him before finalizing the film. After, he Okayed the final version; I sent the film via Dropbox to Ball State alum, Jon Nelson. He proceeded to compose music for the film and finally sent the complete film to me via Google drive. The result is the final version of the Honor's thesis project viewable on the hard-copy DVD and also on the

Google drive link:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2ja0GGLF8NudVZXSkwybUdYYUU/view>.

During the internship and the filming process, I learned so much about the animal care field and the dire need for facilities like the Gulfarium. Zoos and aquariums have a responsibility to educate, conserve, and inspire their communities. I was astounded by the dedication to these ideals exhibited by each and every staff member at the Gulfarium. Not only were they passionate about conservation and education, but they took care of their animals as if they were family (even better in most cases)! My passion for this field led me to want to stand up for conservation and education and discredit those who secretly seek to hinder animal well-fare. If advocates for anti-captivity and pro-captivity could find a way to set aside differences and work together to find solutions for conserving wild populations, then solutions for endangered and threatened species could come about sooner. The goal for this film is to advocate for the continuation of zoos and aquariums, and clear up any misconceptions and misinformation. It is my sincerest hope to educate and inspire *everyone* who watches this documentary. Please enjoy *Gulfarium: A Look Behind the seas*.